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Blueprint Calls for Bigger, More Powerful Government

Some Conservatives Express Concern at Agenda

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President Bush's second-term agenda would expand not only the size of the federal government but also its influence over the lives of millions of Americans by imposing new national restrictions on high schools, court cases and marriages.

In a clear break from Republican campaigns of the 1990s to downsize government and devolve power to the states, Bush is fostering what amounts to an era of new federalism in which the national government shapes, not shrinks, programs and institutions to comport with various conservative ideals, according to Republicans inside and outside the White House.

Bush is calling for new federal accountability and testing requirements for all public high schools, after imposing similar mandates on grades three through eight during his first term. To limit lawsuits against businesses and professionals, he is proposing to put a federal cap on damage awards for medical malpractice, to force class-action cases into federal courts and to help create a national settlement of outstanding asbestos-related cases.

On social policy, the president is pushing a constitutional amendment to outlaw same-sex marriage in the states and continuing to define and expand the federal government's role in encouraging religious groups to help administer social programs such as community drug-rehabilitation efforts.

"We have moved from devolution, which was just pushing back as much power as possible to the states, back to where government is limited but active," said John Bridgeland, director of Bush's domestic policy council in the first term. Bridgeland and current White House officials see Bush's governing philosophy as a smart way to modernize the government, empower individuals and broaden the appeal of the GOP.

Bush maintains a stated desire to streamline the government. On Monday, he sent Congress a budget that would eliminate or consolidate 150 programs. But a growing number of conservatives are uneasy with what they deride as "big-government conservatism."

"He keeps expanding the federal involvement into state and local affairs," said Chris Edwards, a tax and budget expert at the Cato Institute, a think tank that often supports the president's agenda. "My hope would be that there would be an electoral rebuke of big [-government] Republicans like there was when the tectonic plates shifted in 1994."

Rep. Mike Pence (R-Ind.), said: "The Republican majority, left to its own devices from 1995 to 2000, was a party committed to limited government and restoring the balances of federalism with the states. Clearly, President Bush has had a different vision, and that vision has resulted in education and welfare

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policies that have increased the size and scope of government."

Pence, an influential leader of House conservatives, said 50 Republicans gathered in Baltimore this past week and discussed, among other things, an overwhelming desire to protest the expansion of government by opposing Bush's education plan for high school students. While only 33 House Republicans opposed the No Child Left Behind law in the first term, Pence predicted that a significantly larger number will vote against expanding the program to cover high schools. Michael Franc of the Heritage Foundation, a pro-Bush think tank, agreed. "It's a non-starter" in the minds of a large number of Republicans, he said.

In many ways, Bush is simply accelerating the trend toward a bigger, more activist government that was started early in his presidency. Bush not only greatly expanded the federal education system with the No Child Left Behind law, but he also signed the largest expansion of Medicare benefits when he added prescription drug coverage to the program in 2003. The Medicare plan alone is now estimated to cost at least \$720 billion over the next decade. Reacting to the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, Bush created the Department of Homeland Security, provided the federal government broad surveillance powers through the USA Patriot Act, and requested a significantly larger national defense budget.

All of this is a far cry from Republican dogma circa 1995 -- the year of the Republican Revolution. Back then, GOP leaders from Sen. Robert J. Dole (Kan.) to House Speaker Newt Gingrich (Ga.) talked of eliminating entire Cabinet departments, including Education, shrinking government, and returning power to the states and the people.

"If I have one goal for the 104th Congress, it is this: that we will dust off the 10th Amendment and restore it to its rightful place in the Constitution," then-Senate Majority Leader Dole said in his first speech of January 1995. "We will continue in our drive to return power to our states and our people." Republicans talked of devolution, ending "unfunded mandates" and killing government programs with the same zeal they reserve today for fighting terrorists and restructuring Social Security.

In some areas, Bush has moved to reduce the size of government. The president signed three tax cuts into law in the first term, shrinking government receipts; held non-defense discretionary spending to a nominal increase in last year's budget; and is calling for similar austerity in this year's budget.

Even so, spending has exploded under Bush -- as have budget deficits. The government spent \$2.3 trillion and ran a \$412 billion deficit in 2004, compared with the \$1.8 trillion it spent and the \$86 billion surplus it ran in the final full year of the Clinton administration.

Despite the deep cuts in domestic programs in Bush's budget, his second-term agenda is focused more on rethinking than shrinking the federal government's role. Even the president's plan to create individual Social Security accounts, billed as providing Americans more control over their retirements, would require a bigger bureaucracy to administer.

Pence said the only reason Republicans have not paid a political price for overseeing a huge growth in government has been the failure of Democrats to field a deficit hawk as a presidential candidate and to capitalize on the public appetite for smaller government. "I think to the extent Republicans depart from the historic commitment, we do so at our peril."

Yet most of Pence's colleagues have not fought Bush's expansion of the federal government. They recently rejected budget rules that could help slow spending and voted in large numbers for the entire Bush agenda over the past four years. A large majority supports Bush's plans to grow the federal role

over lawsuits, marriages and other social policies.

Bush, never seen as a big fan of shrinking government, has chosen to redefine the Republican Party as more activist, "compassionate" and committed to providing individuals a lift through government policies, aides say. In doing so, he often pushes policies that require conservatives to sacrifice one principle to accomplish another.

Consider education and lawsuits. To win tough testing standards and impose accountability, two goals of many conservatives, Bush pushed through a huge increase in education spending and expanded the federal government's power to police schools, two ideas that would have been viewed by Republicans as heresy a decade ago.

As for lawsuits, Bush and most Republicans support a federal cap on punitive damages in medical liability cases -- which would usurp the power of states -- to create a freer, less costly and more predictable marketplace for doctors and consumers. Sen. Lindsey O. Graham (R-S.C.), who was first elected to the House in 1994, calls this anathema to the GOP's states'-rights philosophy.

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